

Products covered in our concise reviews this month include: an external removable hard drive, Tel-Me version 3, a 3D graphics card with TV tuner, a combined modem and Ethernet card for connecting your notebook to a network, a program designed to optimise your PC's performance, and a high-end 17in monitor

NEC MultiSync M500

NEC's 15in multimedia monitor offers more than just a built-in pair of speakers. For a start, it uses a new type of screen called CromaClear, which has elliptical phosphor dots that are arranged in staggered vertical lines, rather than in the usual triangular pattern. This minimises the black space between dots and increases colour depth and saturation.

Add to this a new type of electron gun and multi-layered anti-static coating on the glass, and the result is a flat, sharp, crisp display with minimal distortion in the corners. NEC's FullScan feature lets you expand the picture to fill the screen (which has a 13.8in diagonal) right up to the plastic frame.

On the outside, the monitor is aggressively futuristic in design, with so many ventilation holes that they have been turned into a styling feature. Front-facing speakers sit either side of the integral microphone, power switch and electronic controls for the on-screen display. Cables are provided to connect the monitor to a sound card, but the microphone connection is up to you. The amplifier (controlled through the on-screen display) offers the normal bass, treble, balance and volume adjustments, but also three special surround modes optimised for watching movies, playing games or stereo simulation from mono sound sources.

It's a shame all monitors aren't made like this, and although the M500 is much more expensive than the competition, it's worth the extra if your budget will stretch.

NEC MultiSync M500

○ £445 (street price incl VAT)	Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ NEC: 0645 404020	Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Norton PC Anywhere 7.5

PC Anywhere has been around in one form or another since the 1980s and this latest version, PC Anywhere 7.5, is specifically designed for users of Windows 95 and Windows NT.

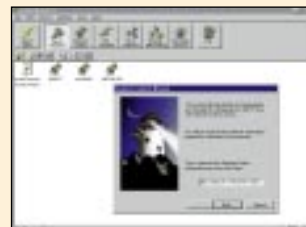
PC Anywhere provides a number of methods to enable PCs to communicate and transfer data easily. This can be done in several different ways, from a simple parallel cable connection (one is included in the box), all the way up to co-ordinating the communications of multiple remote PCs by means of a 'gateway' PC. One of the most useful aspects of the program is its remote-control facility. Using this feature, it is possible to take control of a second PC located anywhere in the world using your local PC, as long as they are both running PC Anywhere, of course.

PC Anywhere is fronted by an easy-to-use interface which does a good job of screening users from the horrors of communication protocols. However, to get the most out of this package you will need to make use of its scripting language. This enables automation of all manner of communication tasks – assuming you can spare the time to learn the long list of commands.

If you have a need to communicate with one or more PCs from remote locations, PC Anywhere will prove invaluable. For local one-to-one connections, though, there are much cheaper solutions.

Norton PC Anywhere 7.5

○ £186.83 (incl VAT)	Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ Symantec: 01734 814230	Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Panasonic KXL-D740

Notebook PCs might be smaller than their desktop counterparts but they frequently offer just as much functionality. However, to keep both the size and price down, many notebook manufacturers decide not to fit a CD-ROM drive as standard. This means many notebook users are denied access to innumerable CD-ROM software titles. Panasonic's new KXL-D740 solves this problem as it's a four-speed CD-ROM drive designed specifically for notebook PCs.

Installing the KXL-D740 under Windows 95 couldn't be easier. The drive connects via a PCMCIA Type II socket – simply put in the card, switch on your PC and insert the supplied driver disk into the floppy drive when requested. Windows 95 then assigns the next available drive letter (usually 'D:') to the KXL-D740 and that's the end of the installation.

A quad-speed CD-ROM drive should be able to sustain a data transfer rate of 600Kb/second, and the KXL-D740 managed this, transferring around 50Mb of data in 90 seconds.

The only criticism we have of the KXL-D740 is that the cable between the drive and the PCMCIA card is too short, which means that it has to sit next to your notebook PC. This might prove annoying if your desk space is limited.

If you've got a notebook computer and you want to add a CD-ROM drive, the Panasonic KXL-D740 is a good, albeit pricey, solution.

Panasonic KXL-D740

○ £426.53 (incl VAT)	Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ Panasonic: 0500 404041	Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



ComSwitch 350e

If you want to use a fax machine at home but only have a single telephone line, then you are faced with a choice. Either you can pay British Telecom £116.33 to install a second line or you can use the fax

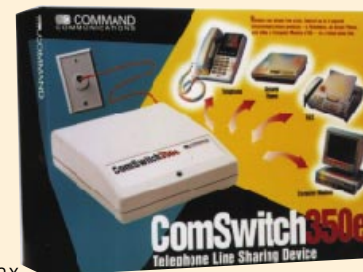
machine with your existing one. The latter may be cheaper but it also has a problem – when the phone rings, you have no way of knowing whether it's a person or a fax machine on the other end. Command Communications' ComSwitch 350e is designed to remedy this.

The ComSwitch is a device that will intercept an incoming call, decide whether it's voice or fax and then route it to the appropriate device. It has four sockets on the back – one to connect to the telephone socket and one each for an answering machine, telephone and fax machine. When a call is received, ComSwitch waits for a special fax tone, and if it hears one, it will send the call to the fax. If not, the call is sent to both the telephone and answering machine, so at least someone or something will answer it.

The ComSwitch is a quick and simple solution to the problem of shared telephone lines but, although it's cheaper to install and run than a second telephone line, it doesn't offer quite the same versatility.

ComSwitch 350e

○ £77.95	Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ Solution Point: 0345 400300	Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Xyratek MaxIT

The Xyratek MaxIT is an external removable hard drive for use with both PCs and Macs. The bad news is that it's a SCSI device, which means that your PC must have a SCSI card before you can use it, although these are relatively inexpensive and easy to fit. The good news is that, once you have one, you can use several SCSI devices at once and, with Windows 95, installation is simply a matter of plugging them in.

The MaxIT certainly follows this rule and we got it up and running in a matter of seconds. The drive itself is about the size of a thick paperback book and it can be stood flat or on its side, using the supplied holder. The cartridges are the same size and shape as a 3.5in floppy disk, if a little thicker, and can store 540Mb in uncompressed form.

Removable hard drives are traditionally expensive, but the MaxIT is actually reasonably priced and, depending on your needs, it can make sound economic sense. The initial outlay works out at an approximate cost of 65p per megabyte, compared to 15p per megabyte for a 1Gb internal IDE drive. Subsequent cartridges, however, cost only about 11p per megabyte.

If you can afford the initial outlay and need flexible storage, the MaxIT will soon pay for itself and, although it's not as stylish or capacious as the Jaz drive reviewed last month, it's cheaper and performs just as well.

Xyratek MaxIT

○ £351.33	Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ £58.75: 540Mb cartridges (one supplied)	Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
○ Xyratek: 01705 498851	Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
	Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



ATI 3D Xpression with TV tuner

ATI has been producing graphics-related hardware since 1985 and its latest graphics accelerator chip, the 3D Rage, features on its latest graphics card, the 3D Xpression.

As with most PCI expansion cards, the 3D Xpression is easy to install and set up. Once you've plugged the card in to your machine, you need only run the installation program on the included CD-ROM and Windows 95 does the rest. The TV tuner comes on a second card which fits into a full-length Isa slot and connects to the 3D Xpression via a bus cable.

ATI supplies you with a number of utilities which allow you to alter all manner of screen attributes with just a few clicks of the mouse. Additionally, you get software which controls the TV tuner's television and teletext functions; you can also take stills or record video clips directly from the displayed television pictures.

The 3D Xpression is supplied with three games – MechWarrior 2, WipeOut and Assault Rigs – all of which have been specially enhanced to take advantage of the 3D Rage chip's perspective, lighting and texture-mapping features.

As a combined TV tuner and graphics accelerator package the 3D Xpression is good value for money.



ATI 3D Xpression with TV tuner

Performance	★★★★★
Ease of use	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

- £199
- ATI: 01235 833666

GoldStar Studioworks 78i

GoldStar recently launched a new range of monitors, and the Studioworks 78i sits at the top. It's a 17in model with a healthy diagonal of just over 16in and a 0.26mm dot pitch and, as far as 17in monitors go, it has a remarkably understated presence on the desktop. This is partly due to the monitor's clean and simple lines, but also due to its compactness. The casing that covers the picture tube at the rear of the monitor is so minimal it makes you wonder how GoldStar has managed to cram everything in.

The 78i's controls are also minimal – just two buttons for power and menu on the front of the case and three dials for brightness, contrast and menu selection underneath it. The image is adjusted via an on-screen menu, activated by the menu button and controlled by the selection dial. The controls are comprehensive and easy to use, thanks to the on-screen display of adjustments.

As far as the display goes, the 78i is pretty crisp. Running at the ideal 17in monitor resolution of 1,024x786 at 75Hz gave a sharp image, with even focus and no distortion. At 1,200x1,024 and 75Hz, the image is just as clear and certainly just as usable.

The Studioworks 78i is a little more expensive than many other 17in monitors, but the excellent image quality goes a long way towards justifying the price.



GoldStar Studioworks 78i

Ease of use	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

- £680.33
- GoldStar: 01753 500400

Grey Cell 3400 V.34 Modem/Ethernet PC Card

Connecting a notebook PC to a network is still considered awkward. You cannot fit a standard network card, and PCMCIA network cards tend to have bulky adaptors dangling from them.

Grey Cell's 3400 is a combined modem/Ethernet network card with a slight difference: both the telephone and network connectors are built on to an extension at the end of the card.

The 3400 plugs into any standard Type II PCMCIA (PC Card) socket, and its two RJ45 connectors extend about three centimetres from the end of the card. The card is compatible with the NE2000 network card, and Grey Cell has included a complete set of ODI, NDIS and IPX network drivers. Also in the box is an RJ45-BNC converter and a lead to connect the 3400 to your telephone socket.

We didn't experience any problems using the 3400 as a fax modem. It conforms to the V.34 modem standard, which means it can transfer uncompressed data at a rate of 28,800bps. The 3400 can be used on 10BaseT (Twisted Pair Ethernet) and 10Base2 (Cheapernet/Thinnet) networks, and we managed to successfully establish a network connection using Windows 95.

A neat compact alternative to other less elegant fax/modem/network card solutions, but its rather vulnerable protrusion from the PCMCIA slot means that leaving it in a notebook's slot puts it at risk of damage.



Grey Cell 3400 V.34 PC Card

Performance	★★★★★
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

- £440.63
- Grey Cell Systems: 0181 902 8998

Tel-Me version 3

Tel-Me is an on-line service aimed at business users. This new version offers several new services – in addition to AA Roadwatch information, Press Association news headlines, UK weather reports and Infocheck company profiles, it is now possible to send e-mail to postal addresses, book airline flights and make Expotel hotel reservations.

Unlike many on-line services that require you to stay connected while you use them, Tel-Me adopts an 'off-line' approach. Requests are made using the Tel-Me software on the PC by selecting a service and filling in the blanks in a query window. Only when the query is complete will the software dial Tel-Me, send the request and download the result. Once finished, it disconnects and displays the information on-screen.

Charges are made by enquiry, rather than length of connection. Actual charges depend on the service used, and some are free. Typical charges are 15p for a BR timetable search, 30p for AA Roadwatch information, 48p for a first-class letter and up to £24 for a company profile. Fortunately, warnings are given if an expensive search is to be made.

If you regularly need access to the sort of information it provides, then Tel-Me is much more efficient and cost-effective than a standard on-line information service, but its lack of Internet access makes it an incomplete solution.



- £58.69 (software); £176.19 (software and 28.8 modem); £11.69 (monthly subscription)
- PhoneLink: 01734 393005

Tel-Me version 3

Ease of use	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Agent 95

Although memory prices seem to be in a downward spiral, few off-the-shelf PCs are fitted with more than 16Mb of Ram. Even with this amount of memory, running more than a couple of applications under Windows 95 can result in frustrating delays while your PC uses some of the hard disk as 'virtual memory'.

Agent 95 from Connectix is designed to counter this and it has a number of system monitors and utilities to optimise your PC's performance.

Agent 95 is made up of four component agents: System, Memory, Resources and Performance. By clicking on each of the tabbed headings in a window, you get information relating to the many elements that may affect overall performance of your PC. This information is generally represented as pie or bar charts, but the System agent provides you with a comprehensive list of settings and statistics garnered from various sources.

Agent 95 also has a built-in RAM compression feature, which compresses data stored in physical memory so that it takes up much less space than usual. As a result, there is more room in RAM for data and virtual (hard drive) memory is used less frequently.

Agent 95 is very easy to use and provides a lot of revealing information. However, we can't say we noticed much of a performance increase on our 16Mb DX2/66 test machine and an extra 4Mb of RAM is probably a better buy.



Agent 95

Ease of use	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

- £70.44
- Connectix UK: 0171 622 3355

Roland PMA-5

A musical equivalent of the electronic organiser, Roland's PMA-5 (Personal Musical Assistant) combines the features of a top-quality sound card with 8-track Midi sequencing software.

You can create and play complex compositions without the need for a keyboard (musical or otherwise), using a stylus and touch-screen panel. All the functions you need, as well as a two-octave keyboard, are reproduced on-screen. To change a value you simply touch it and drag the stylus up, down, left or right.

The PMA-5 comes with 306 instrument sounds built in, as well as 16 drum kits. You can play up to 28 notes simultaneously, making complex orchestral pieces possible. And, there are 100 preset styles, covering a wide range of musical genres. Essentially, these are ready-made compositions which you can use as they are, or customise. There's also space for storing up to 200 of your own patterns.

Chord progressions can be handled automatically, too. You simply select a root and chord type (there are 26 available).

The sequencer itself has four tracks for the melody and four backing tracks and holds up to 20 songs. Once you've recorded a composition, the eight tracks can be mixed and stereo-panned and effects such as chorus and reverb added.

A versatile mobile MIDI studio. Great sounds, but for serious composition, you'll need to plug in a MIDI keyboard.



Roland PMA-5

Performance	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

- £445
- Roland: 01792 702701